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AUTHOR Bridges, Jean B.
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ABSTRACT

Promoting lifelong reading is one objective of East Georgia College's English courses--all of them, even composition--because learning is a lifelong pursuit and to read is to continue to learn. This 2-year college's students range in age from 16-66 with varied interests but similar cultural backgrounds. Most come from non-reading, economically disadvantaged homes. While some authorities argue against placing literature in the composition classroom, many others are in favor, so long as the main course objectives involve writing. Selected reading varies from campus to campus, including professional essays, popular magazines, and other material of interest to the student. At East Georgia College, contemporary novels, best sellers, or new biographies or autobiographies are chosen, such as "The Cold Sassy Tree" and "Song of Solomon." Authors come to speak to the student body and students are given an opportunity to talk to them and to have their own books autographed afterwards. In the classroom, after the reading assignment, discussion begins, then a brief quiz, and then a writing assignment is given. Reading novels, biographies, and autobiographies stimulates the students to think for themselves and to express those thoughts in both oral and written media. (Contains six references.) (CR)

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Jean B. Bridges

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Cold Sassy Tree and Song of Solomon: Novels in the Composition Class

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"Dr. Bridges, I bought Cold Sassy Tree today. I can't wait to read it." Now, that student may sound to you that he or she is trying to garnish a few points, but the truth is that Bonnie was not in any English class that quarter. She purchased the book not because it was a requirement but because she wanted to. Of course, not all students enjoy the books we select to this extent, but some do. Promoting lifelong reading is one objective of East Georgia College's English courses--all of them, even composition--because we believe that learning is a lifelong pursuit and to read is to continue to learn.

I don't believe any English instructor would disagree with this premise, but there are those who don't believe that composition classes should engage in literary discussion. I believe that it is possible to use some literature and not spend too much time lecturing or discussing. I just let the students read and then take two or three days for discussion after I check the reading with a brief quiz before the discussion, I then give some topics and let them write. I don't discourage creativity, and I let them interpret. Both reading and writing take practice, and we must provide opportunities for both (Holladay 187).

At East Georgia College, a two-year college in the University System of Georgia, the students range in age from 16 to 66, the usual spread for a two-year college. Interests and ages vary, but the cultural background of most is similar. Most come from non-reading homes, and the economic situation in this geographical area is grim. The beautiful college campus of 207 acres is located in a rural area, and the commuting students drive in from small towns from a fifty-mile radius. Experiences beyond small town life are few. As a rule these students are polite, serious, and open to suggestion.

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Otherwise, the procedures we use and the books we read in composition classes might not work elsewhere.

When I began teaching in 1960-61, five novels were required in English 101. This amount of reading did wreck havoc with the writing instruction. But did I teach writing? Many English conferences, many English courses, and many professional journals later I learned about the teaching of composition and the misuse of literature.

Erica Linderman, whom I hold in high regard, states that first year writing instructors should teach writing. She presents a solid argument against placing literature in the composition class, but many others (Gary Tate, Michael Gold, Robin Lent, Dan Morgan, Sylvia Holladay) counter with their reasons for including such reading in composition. In fact, most professors I know take this stance so long as the main course objectives involve writing.

The kind of reading selected varies from campus to campus. Some in our profession prefer that the readings be professional essays; others prefer popular magazines and other material of interest to the student (Gold 261). If a novel is selected, some prefer a recognized name that belongs somewhere in the "canon." At first we used Brontë, Chopin, Hawthorne, Hardy, Hemingway, and Faulkner. At East Georgia College we have tried all of these, and now we have moved over a period of trial and error to contemporary novels, even best sellers, or a new biography or autobiography.

During the last five years the novels we have used include If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin; The Heart of a Distant Forest by Philip Lee Williams; Whisper of the River, Run With the Horsemen, and When All the World Was Young by Ferroll Sams; Cold Sassy Tree by Olive Ann Burns; Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison: Colony by

Anne R. Siddons; The Client by John Grisham; and The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullars. Autobiographies have included these titles: I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings by Maga Angelou and Growing Up by Russell Baker.

Whenever we can, we arrange for the authors to come to the campus. Over the past twenty years some authors who have spoken to the student body include Ferroll Sams, Pat Conroy, Paul Hemphill, Remar Sutton, Rosemary Daniell, Louis Grizzard, Olive Ann Burns, Terry Kay, Philip Lee Williams, and Virginia Spencer Carr. If possible, we try to have them during the quarter we're reading their work. Talking to the authors afterwards and having their own books autographed mean so much.

The selection process begins when the English Department members sit down for the annual review of texts, procedures, etc. in the early spring. There are several subsequent meetings before final decisions are made. These considerations are discussed at length; each person makes suggestions about books. Why? There are several considerations:

1. Moderate length of book (not over 400 pages)

   We want them to read a whole book--not scan. If they are to explore the pages, the length must not be excessive.

2. Low cost of book

   We decided long ago that it should be available in paperback if over $12.00 (exception: The Bridges of Madison County - we can purchase for $12.95.) Our students are not generally financially well off. Since there are too many paperbacks available for four to eight dollars, we stick to paperbacks.

3. No Cliff Notes or Monarch Notes available

   The students cannot depend upon someone else's interpretation, good or bad. If these are available, the book will not be considered.

4. Consideration of student interests/needs

   Students seem to enjoy books about the South, about Georgia in particular (especially those written by Georgia authors), about current issues, about growing up, and so on.

5. Not excessive difficulty of text

   We try to check the difficulty of the text. We don't want to discourage reading by selecting a novel that is too difficult to comprehend.. Students can read those novels later!

In the exploration the faculty try to find books that are interesting, exciting, stimulating, informative, and relative. We never want to destroy the integrity of the course: that is, never forsaking the writing process, grammar drill, sentence combining exercises, or any of a myriad of components needed for composition training. The selection process ends only when students respond in writing. During one quarter a student wrote: "The novel Song of Solomon blew my mind until I realized what it was all about." Her essay was positively great! Students read, discuss, and then write. Simple? Actually, yes. The novel adds excitement and is a capstone to the composition course.

To delineate briefly what happens in the classes each quarter is to begin with the reading assignment. If the book appears somewhat difficult, the instructor may give some preliminary assistance. Quite frequently, the instructors meet to discuss the books before

they begin to teach them--a fun time for the faculty. Last week we talked for two hours about Song of Solomon.

On the day the discussion begins, the instructor gives a brief quiz on the book's content. In the case of Song of Solomon the interesting names might be the focal point of his quiz since figuring out who's who makes some students feel triumphant. Macon Dead I, II, and III (Milkman) intrigue the reader, and figuring out the family lineage back to Solomon, "who flew back" to Africa, makes Milkman feel fulfilled. When Cold Sassy Tree is being discussed, the characters like Will's Aunt Loma and his girlfriend Lightfoot usually have us laughing or weeping. The plot and the themes are explored by enthusiastic students. I'll admit the instructors enjoy themselves as well.

The discussion days are the best part. Once more, literary criticism is not the point. Toni Morrison's life and successes are highlighted before the plot is revealed and the main ideas are discussed. Character development is often explored. With Song of Solomon students have fun with the "maturation theme," the "flight" theme, the Biblical names and their possible plot connections, and Milkman's character. That great love story in Cold Sassy Tree or Will Tweedy's character are always highlights in that discussion.

Finally, the students receive a writing assignment which has at least four choices. They are asked to write the essay using quotes from the text for support. The Song of Solomon papers will be due when I return. What can I expect? If this quarter is like others as when Cold Sassy Tree has been the novel, these essays will be the richest, fullest, cleanest! (Richer in detail; full - longer in length than usual; cleaner in mechanics and grammar.) The very best seems to come forth, partially, I think because they are

free to think for themselves. This is "Democracy through Language" (the Program theme).

For our students this avenue of exploration seems right. Curriculum decisions must reflect the individual departmental culture. The books we use may appear non-traditional or anti-intellectual, but their use is rather traditional. The benefits of using novels include creating awareness and respect for cultural diversity; a sensitivity for racial bias as well as sexual and religious discrimination; and understanding of the family relationships; the effect of poverty; community ritual, power/political pressures; an expansion of experience. Reading novels, biographies, and autobiographies stimulates thinking for one's self and expressing those thoughts in both oral and written media. The apparent outcomes include an enhanced self esteem and increased interest in books. These beliefs have been reinforced by twenty-five years of novel instruction in the composition class. Though East Georgia College is only twenty years old, it has opened up educational opportunity to an area that is both economically and culturally deprived. Since most students are first generation college students,

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